

CRITICAL SOCIOLOGY OR SOCIOLOGY OF CRITIQUE

Report on the 11th Conference of The European Sociological Association (28–31 August 2013, Turin)

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This year, more participants than ever (about 2600 persons) registered for the biannual professional conference of European sociologists. Over three days a total of 2700 presentations and poster displays took place.

The ESA had chosen an important and timely, real European theme for the conference again: “Crises, Critique and Change”. More specifically, it intended to explore three questions: Which crisis? Whose critique? What changes? The participants of the conference attempted to provide a thorough response to the first two questions from various points of view. Answering the third question was less powerfully successful which indicates that the sociologist profession has to make significant efforts to strengthen its social and professional prestige, which appears to have been shaken. The program committee explained the theme in the invitation to the conference in the following way: “...The present crisis is multi-faceted. It is not just a debt crisis, but also a political and social crisis...The crisis is likely to produce a seismic shift in and for European sociology, across its substantive areas of research (aging, families, religion, science, theory, women studies, etc.) What is behind the crisis? Two processes are at work. Firstly, there has been a systemic transformation driving the shift from public to private power and adapting the state to capital markets. But, secondly, there has been a proliferation of vital types of critique too. The Occupy protesters, the social uprising in the Arab Spring, the unrest in Greece, and discontent in other European countries are all indicative of a reconfiguration of the link between

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crisis and critique. To foster and understand the crisis and the dual role of critique in interpreting and effecting changes, European sociology has to rely on (1) rediscovering its subject matter as being more than a technical order, as a social world that has a history and place, and (2) a broad-ranging debate on consequent conceptual and empirical questions.” The ESA president, Pekka Sulkunen (Finland), in his welcome remarks which were related to the dramatic problem described above, noted that the European integration project has never since its inception been as close to crashing as it is now.

The two opening plenary sessions created the basic tone of the conference and the debate. In her lecture, Mary Mellor (UK) (Finance in Crisis – the Neglected Critique of Money) provided a concise review of the history and nature of money and pointed out the fallacies of conventional economics and myths about the origins of money and banking. She declared that sociologists rather than economists should be at the forefront of analyses of money and the consequences of its privatization and abuse. As a response, Stephan Lessenich (Germany) in his lecture entitled “What’s Critique got to do with it?” asked whether we were addressing critical sociology or the sociology of critique. He determined that while one part of the pragmatic division credits sociology with the professional responsibility of evaluating the social acceptability of late-capitalist society, the other one claims that sociologists should restrict themselves to observing people in their everyday practices of social critique. The presentation argued for a critical sociology of critique; namely, for a sociology of social critique without consequences – or of a critical practice without practical consequences.

The topics of the semi-plenary sessions were predominantly about the difficulties of the economic crisis and called for professionals to search for a new attitude (a few interesting topics: The North Atlantic Financial Crises, Crises Construal, Crisis Management and Crisis-displacement; Crisis and Critique: Reconstructing Political Economy; The Euro zone Crisis and its Social Impacts).

The lectures of the mid-day special sessions attracted a high level of attention as well and explored a few emphasized, crucial topics. For the lecture by Helga Novotny, President of the European Research Council (Horizon 2020 and the European Research Area: What future for the Social Sciences?) it was almost impossible to get a seat. She is a regular participant of ESA conferences and everyone expects new information from her regarding research funding trends and priorities. She attempted to reassure those who were skeptical that the situation of social sciences is not “hopeless” from this perspective. The ERC will continue to fund research projects in all fields of science in a genuine bottom-up mode, without thematic priorities

and with the sole criteria of scientific excellence. She called attention to the program mentioned in the title of her lecture: The EU Framework Program for Research and Innovation 2014-2020. Within this, the Societal Challenges pillar provides good opportunities for funding research with sociological characteristics.

A separate mid-day session dealt with the situation of 'the university'. Two passionate lectures were delivered. The lecture by John Holmwood (UK) (The Neo-Liberal Knowledge Regime, Public Higher Education, and the Future of Social Sciences) and the lecture by Massimiliano Vaira (Italy) (A Decade of Disruption. Italian University in the Neoliberal Era) both opined that a wider and more aggressive strategy of attacks against public education (public universities) has been observed — in the UK since 2010 and in Italy in the framework of the reforms of 2001-2006, 2008-2010. Where, previously, universities had operated according to a mixed model of private and public activities, they are now to be subjected to market discipline and government regulation designed to create privatized knowledge. The idea of "public" is central to the development of the social sciences and sociology in particular.

It is worth mentioning that none of the lecturers of the 12 semi-plenary and 18 mid-day specials session (with the exception of the sole Slovenian sociologist, Metha Kuhar) was from a former state socialist country.

In the 36 Research Network Sessions and 12 Research Stream Sessions everybody could find a topic which met his or her professional interests. One of the most populous Research Network Sessions about the 'Sociology of Education' included around 50 lectures. The principal topics were the following: Education and employment; the Impact of the crisis in education; Financial contracts or ideological options; Crisis, solidarity and resistances. It can be generally stated that the classical paradigm (the development of social differences in the education system) is still relevant today, and research projects have observed increases in social differences as a consequence of the crisis. Besides the conventional fields of differentiation (ethnic groups, gender aspects, the social capital inherited from parents), new fields have emerged (immigrants, refugees, age-groups, occupations). After decades of democratization, in the last few years elitism in higher education has come to prominence (the hysterical success of university rankings may serve as a good illustration of this).

Concerning higher education, the question of autonomy was re-emphasized. I myself presented a lecture entitled "Institutional autonomy in higher education". The question of the sustainability of higher education has become a very relevant issue in European higher education organizations since 2008 as a consequence of the economic crisis. On the institutional level this is

primarily expressed in relation to financing. Institutional autonomy is a key factor in maintaining this autonomy since institutional missions can only be fulfilled in a regulatory environment which incentivizes the diversification of financial resources and cooperation with outside stakeholders. Restrictions on public funding, more direct state control and recentralization may diminish institutional autonomy.

A few years ago the French president at that time, Nicolas Sarkozy, commented: “The end of ‘68 is now”. The conference reported on this dramatic situation across a broad professional spectrum.

The session of the General Assembly took place in the framework of the conference. A new Executive Committee and President (Carmen Lecardi – Italy) were elected. It was announced that the former Executive Committee had made an important decision: A European Journal of Cultural and Political Sociology will be published. This will be the second journal of the ESA (the first is ‘European Societies’).

The next conference will be organized in Prague in 2015.